UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Uptown Building and Theatre, 3700/17 Broadway, is located in Kansas City's Westport District. The rectangular structure, a Renaissance Revival style building, has a frontage of approximately 160 feet on Broadway and approximately 153 feet on Valentine Road. The structure consists of two adjoining sections, parallel rectangles. The front rectangle, fronting along Broadway is a three story office building. Seven ground floor shops take up the first floor of this section, with the additional two floors used for offices. The office building portion of the structure has a depth of approximately 72 fe Immediately behind, and adjoining this section, with its entrance at the northeast corner of the building is the theatre portion of the building. The theatre has a frontag of 81 feet on Valentine Road and a depth of 150 feet.

Construction materials and colors

The structural steel frame of the building is covered with exterior curtain walls of cream colored terra cotta and buff brick. Red brick is used for the south and west facades, away from the streets. Sheet copper is used as trim around the windows and for the decorative paneling below the windows. The building has a flat composition roof, except for the northeast corner, which features a dome of sheet metal, painted silver. A basement runs under the entire structure. A great deal of ornamental plaster work is evident throughout the building, expecially in the theatre interior. The plaster work was done by the Architectural Decorating Company of Chicago. 1

East (Broadway) facade

This facade is visually divided into eight bays. The bays are marked by glazed terra cotta fluted pilasters with decorative caps. The first floor shops have undergone numerous alterations, although in places the marble base course is still visible. Oriel windows project from each bay of the second floor. The center panel of each window consists of a single pane of glass. On each side, set at an angle are four-over-four wood, double-hung, sash windows. Beneath the oriel windows are decorative pressed metal panels featuring sea shell and floral motifs. The rectangular third floor windows have been filled in with glass blocks. These windows feature concrete mullions and a running concrete lintel. A molded belt course of decorative terra cotta runs below the third floor windows. An unadorned terra cotta frieze runs below this. The northern three bays of this facade are set slightly forward. A recessed entrance is located at the sixth bay Decorative metal and glass light fixtures are located at the mid-point of each pilaster.

North (Valentine Road) facade

The first three bays west of the ticket booth are identical in treatment to the Broadway facade, however, instead of having store fronts, the first floor level is filled in with terra cotta blocks. The remaining five bays are of buff brick, separated by terra cotta pilasters identical to those along the front of the building. The terra cotta frieze and belt molding are also similar to that along the Broadway facade. At the top of the third floor level the bays are separated by terra cotta decorative panels. The brick work between the panels contains terra cotta festoons. Above this is another projecting belt course, with a shaped parapet crowning this portion of the building. Bays five and seven of this facade contain solid double wood doors, set within a terra cotta surround. Bay six contains two display cases, also set in terra cotta surrounds.

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UPTOWN BUILDING AND THEATRE

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second floor level covered with

Four recessed narrow rectangular areas are noted on the second floor level, covered with riron grills. Two of these open into windows; the remaining two have been closed.

Dome section (northeast corner)

The visual emphasis of the building is the three-bay theatre entrance at the curved northeast corner of the building. With an angled entrance, the ticket booth is in the center of the first floor level, flanked on each side by three single panel doors, with a transom above each containing art glass. The ornate three-sectioned ticket booth features a marble base with decorative plaster insets. The upper panes of glass are separated by ornate decorative spiraling wood columns, supporting a complex crown. The second floor of this section features three rounded fan-like windows. Above each window, projecting from the plane of the wall is a keystone ornament. The third floor continues the design of the Broadway facade with rectangular windows filled in with glass blocks. Projecting from this facade is a large, curved and lighted marque. Drawing emphasis to this corner of the building is a metal dome, topped with a lantern, both painted silver.

South facade

A small passageway separates this wall of the building from the adjacent structure. The oriel window treatment of the Broadway facade is continued around the corner for one bay along the south facade. The first floor level beneath the oriel window is enclosed. The remainder of this wall is red brick, with irregular window and door placement. A fire escape is located along this wall.

West facade

Five attached brick piers distinguish the red brick walls of the facade. The first floor portion of this facade projects approximately five feet. A metal door at the second floor level opens onto this projection. Metal stairs at the south end lead away from this ramp, which is also faced with red brick.

Theatre lobby and interior

The theatre is approached by an east-west lobby, with the theatre seats facing south to the stage. The lobby interior is richly decorative with polychromed plaster ornament. Marble baseboards and wainscotting run around the lobby floor of terrazzo, which slopes slightly toward the theatre. The backside of the ticket booth, seen from the lobby, is similar to the exterior side. Close to the entrance doors, on the south wall of the lobby is an entrance, now closed, that formerly led into the office portion of the building. At the point where the two rectangular sections of the building meet, there is a single run staircase on the south, with marble steps, metal balusters, and a wood handrail. To the north of this are paired double doors leading to an extension of the

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lobby and to the aisles running down each side of the theatre. A partitioned ticket office and a concession stand have been added along the north wall of the lobby. Two glass display cases are located on the south lobby wall. Polychromed plaster light fixtures are also located on the lobby walls.

The original plans for the theatre, by Robert Gornall, called for an interior decor based on Venetian prototypes. Walls and ceilings were planned to be rich in reds and blues with sidewalls treated to represent open galleries overlooking canals dotted with qondolas.4

New York theatre architect, John Eberson, was hired to complete the theatre. He continued the Italian garden theme and enriched it with his "atmospheric" devices. While the theatre has undergone various usage and frequent remodeling, the basic decorative scheme is still intact. Polychromed plaster comprises most of the decoration. Representations of shrubs, trellises, trees and birds are along the side walls of the theatre and contribute to the impression of an Italian garden. Both the side walls and proscenium are decorated with balconies. Nitches along the side walls contain reproduction of statuary from various museums. Open colonnades of spiraling pillars frame the side aisles. These colonnades were once hung with tapestries and banners. The plaster ceiling was arranged to give the effect of the sky. Painted blue, small electric lights conveyed the blues, greens, and yellows of the stars. Once, these stars were momentarily obscured by the passage of swift clouds - an effect obtained by a special projection machine, no longer extant. Bright birds were once entwined among the vines of the walls and a bevy of doves crossed the auditorium in endless flight.³

The floors of the theatre are of poured concrete. The original seating capacity was approximately 2300. The original carpets and brocaded seats have been removed and replaced with folding chairs and tables. The orchestra floor is stepped in five levels. Above is a curved balcony of three levels, also with poured concrete floors. The balcony has a rear lobby, with stairs located at each end. Offices and restrooms are located in the hallway of the balcony level.

The stage, set within a richly ornamented proscenium, has wood floors. The spacious ceiling area is taken up with lights, drop curtains, and ropes. Dressing rooms are located to the west of the stage area.

Alterations

There have been only minor alterations to the exterior of the building, although shifting of interior non-bearing partitions has been frequent. In 1941, the architect Charles A. Smith was commissioned to make some changes in the brick work, the third story wall, and to replace the third floor windows with glass blocks. 5 The interior has undergone numerous changes, such as removal of original seats and the addition of a

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ticket booth and concession stand in the lobby, without substantially altering the basic integrity of the original decorative scheme.

Condition

Both the exterior of the building and theatre and the interior of the theatre are in good condition.

Site

The buildings sit on the southwest corner of Valentine Road and Broadway. To the north, across Valentine, is a surface parking lot. To the east, across Broadway, is a surface parking lot and commercial building. A multi-family residential structure is located to the south and a residential structure to the west.

Present status

The Uptown Building contains several commercial concerns, such as a beauty shop, bar, and printing service. The theatre is currently used for concerts by contemporary musicians.

FOOTNOTES

- 1. Western Contractor, 20 July 1927, p. 34.
- 2. "A Sketch of the Interior of South Broadway's Projected Theatre," Kansas City Star, 21 Nov. 1926, p. 10.
- "A Theatre of Richness," <u>Kansas City Star</u>, 5 Jan. 1928, p. 17.
 "Night Attraction for Broadway," <u>Kansas City Star</u>, 8 Jan. 1928, sec. D, p. 1.
- Building Permit #11937A, 8 December 1941, Building permit office, 18th floor, City Hall, Kansas City, Missouri.

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*STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Uptown Building and Theatre, 3700-17 Broadway, is Kansas City's sole example of the "Atmospheric Theatre," a type of movie house construction popular in the 1920's. The concept is credited to John Eberson, the designer of this structure. This is Eberson's only known work in Kansas City. The Renaissance Revival style building was constructed in two stages in 1926 and 1927 and has a long and continuing history as a popular entertainment source in Kansas City.

John Eberson and the "Atmospheric Theatre"

Two major types of movie theatre design have been identified. The "standard" had precedents in the opera house and vaudeville theatre. This elegant style featured gilt and marble, crystal chandeliers, luxurious lounges, and deep pile rugs. It grew increasingly exotic, creating an affluent image. The second type, the "atmospheric" featured illusionistic devices, often seeking to resemble outdoor gardens. The creator of the Atmospheric school of design was John Eberson. 1 Eberson was born in Austria around 1875. After training in architecture in Vienna and Dresden, he immigrated to the United States and settled in St. Louis.2 During the early years of the Twentieth century, Eberson traveled through the mid-west with a promoter of small-town "opera houses." The promoter was looking for locations where he could sell the citizens on the need for a theater, which Eberson would then design. Their success resulted in Eberson acquiring the sobriquet "Opera House John." During his career, Eberson designed almost a hundred atmospheric theatres. The concept was rooted in the conviction that a theatre should be a warm, friendly place. Visual devices that often contributed to a lush garden theme were the embodiments of this concept. His interiors have been described as ". . .complete imitations of exotic environments, conceived in a highly romantic way."4 The atmospheric theatre relied on "manufactured weather," ingenious lighting effects and stage set decoration. Eberson's first design for an atmospheric theatre was the 1923 Majestic Theatre in Houston, Texas. This theatre projected the illusion of an open Italian garden, but did not have the fully automatic manufactured weather of his later creations.⁵ One surprising advantage of this type of theatre was substantially reduced construction costs. Less interior finishing was required and lower maintenance and upkeep costs created a real advantage over the rich decor of the standard models.6 Eberson's practical creed was "Prepare Practical Plans for Pretty Playhouses - Please Patrons - Pay Profits." He was able to ingeniously add to his own profits. In some theatres, such as the Avalon in Chicago, Mrs. Eberson made the drapes and banners from her own collection of material. Most of the decorative elements (columns, arches, gazebos, etc.) were manufactured of cast-plaster by the Michaelangelo Studios, a firm specializing in outfitting theatres and owned by Eberson.7

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History of the building

The Uptown Building and Theatre was constructed in two stages. The Valentine Realty Company was responsible for construction of the Uptown Building, the office portion, which was completed in November, 1926. This portion, with its shops extending along Broadway, was designed by Robert Gornall. A theatre was planned to extend along the rear portion of this building, with the tower at the north end to serve both as a foyer and an entrance to the theatre. Robert Gornall, a Kansas City architect, began his career around 1914 as a draftsman. He had a brief partnership with S.B. Tarbet. From 1924 to 1934 he practiced alone. The Uptown Building is the most notable of his few works known to us. 10

The original plans for the theatre were also by Gornall. Footing for the foundation was poured in 1926 as the office portion was being completed. However, completion of the theatre was delayed and the Universal Film Company acquired the shell of the unfinished building in 1927. John Eberson was hired to complete the building and to supervise the interior decoration. General contractor for both portions of the building was the Fleming-Gilchrist Construction Company, a Kansas City firm. 11

The theatre opened to a capacity crowd on January 6, 1928. The audience was described as being as interested in the sky effect of the ceiling as in the comedy feature film, staring Lois Moran and Norman Kerry, "The Irresistible Lover."12 When it was built, the theatre was the largest in the city's residential district and the first outside of the downtown area to show first-run pictures. 13 An added attraction for a population that was increasingly utilizing the automobile was the free parking across Broadway, provided by the theatre. "A uniformed footman, with luminous white gloves, a police whistle and flashlight, escorted patrons across the street." 14

Live entertainment was also a feature, with P. Hans Flath acting as musical director and featured organist. The Columbia-Recording Orchestra of Tracy Brown also played a lengthy engagement. During the first year, unknown comedian Bob Hope, performed for a week. A later attraction was organist Alberta Bird, billed as "Dolly Fashion." Each week she played a "hits of the week" medley and modeled a new dress fashion. Occasionally her act was highlighted by filmed lyrics with a "little bouncing ball" to encourage audience sing-alongs.

Other means of attracting patrons included dish give-aways, a series of seven evening weddings performed on the stage, and personal appearances by movie stars, including Joe E. Brown, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, and Tom Mix and his horse, Tony.

In the summer of 1939 the Uptown copyrighted an exclusive innovation, Fragratone. Various scents, such as orange or rose perfume, emanated from the ventilation system at appropriate moments in the film, adding olfactory pleasure to the picture's visual enjoyment.15

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UPTOWN BUILDING AND THEATRE

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The theatre served as a movie house for forty-five years, changing ownership several times. In 1973, a Tulsa corporation undertook considerable renovation of the building and opened it briefly as the Palace Dinner Playhouse. 16

Currently the theatre is used for cabaret performances by contemporary musicians.

The survey of Missouri's historic sites is based on the selection of sites as they relate to theme studies in "Missouri's State Historic Preservation Plan." The Uptown Building and Theatre, therefore, is being nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as an example of the themes of "Architecture," "Fine Arts and Humanities," "Recreation," and "Technology."

FOOTNOTES

- Ben M. Hall, The Best Remaining Seats (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1961), p. 95 and Dennis Sharp, The Picture Palace (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1969),
- "John Eberson, 79, Architect, Is Dead," New York Times, 7 March 1954, p. 90. 2.
- 3. Hall, p. 95.
- Sharp, p. 74 and 76.
- 5. Sharp, p. 76.
- Frank Cronican, "From an Incense Burner. . . Came a Persian Courtyard," Marquee. June-August, 1970, p. 2.
- Hall, p. 100. 7.
- Hall, p. 102. 8.
- 9. Western Contractor, 10 November, 1926, p. 36.
- Polk's Kansas City, Missouri, City Directory (Kansas City: Gate City Publishing Co.), 10. 1923-1935.
- 11.
- Western Contractor, 20 July 1927, p. 34.
 "Uptown Opens to Capacity," Kansas City Times, 7 Jan. 1928, p. 5. 12.
- "Night Attraction for Broadway," Kansas City Star, 8 Jan. 1928, sec. D., p. 1. 13.
- Joe Redmond, "Starlit Ceiling Was a Theatre Hit," Kansas City Times, 4 August 1973, 14. sec. c., p. 18.
- 15. Ibid.
- "'Palace' for Plays, Dinner," Kansas City Star, 22 July 1973, sec. E., p. 2. 16.

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"A Sketch of the Interior of South Broadway's Projected Theatre." Kansas City Star, 21 November 1926, p. 10. "A Theatre of Richness." Kansas City Star, 5 Jan. 1928, p. 17. (continued:) 10GEOGRAPHICAL DATA 0.576 acre ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY __ "Kansas City, Missouri-Kansas" QUADRANGLE NAME QUADRANGLE SCALE 1:24.000 UTM REFERENCES 14.312.415.5.nl A[1,5] [3] 6, 2, 3, 7, 0 ZONE EASTING NORTHING VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION S 45 FT MEAS ON E LI LOTS 1,2,3 & N 18 FT OF LOT 4, N 18 FT E 25.62 FT OF LOT 30 E 25.62' OF 31.32 FT OF LOT 33 MCGEE PLACE IN WESTPORT LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES CODE STATE CODE COUNTY CODE STATE CODE COUNTY TIFORM PREPARED BY 1. Sherry Piland, Architectural Historian DATE ORGANIZATION Landmarks Commission of Kansas City, Missouri December 5, 1978 TELEPHONE STREET & NUMBER City Hall - 26th Floor E., 414 E. 12th Street (816) 274-2555 CITY OR TOWN STATE Kansas City 64106 Missouri 22 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS: NATIONAL. STATE .. As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service. STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE Director, Department of Natural Resources and TITLE DATE State Historic Preservation Officer I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER DATE KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER ATTEST: DATE CHIEF OF REGISTRATION

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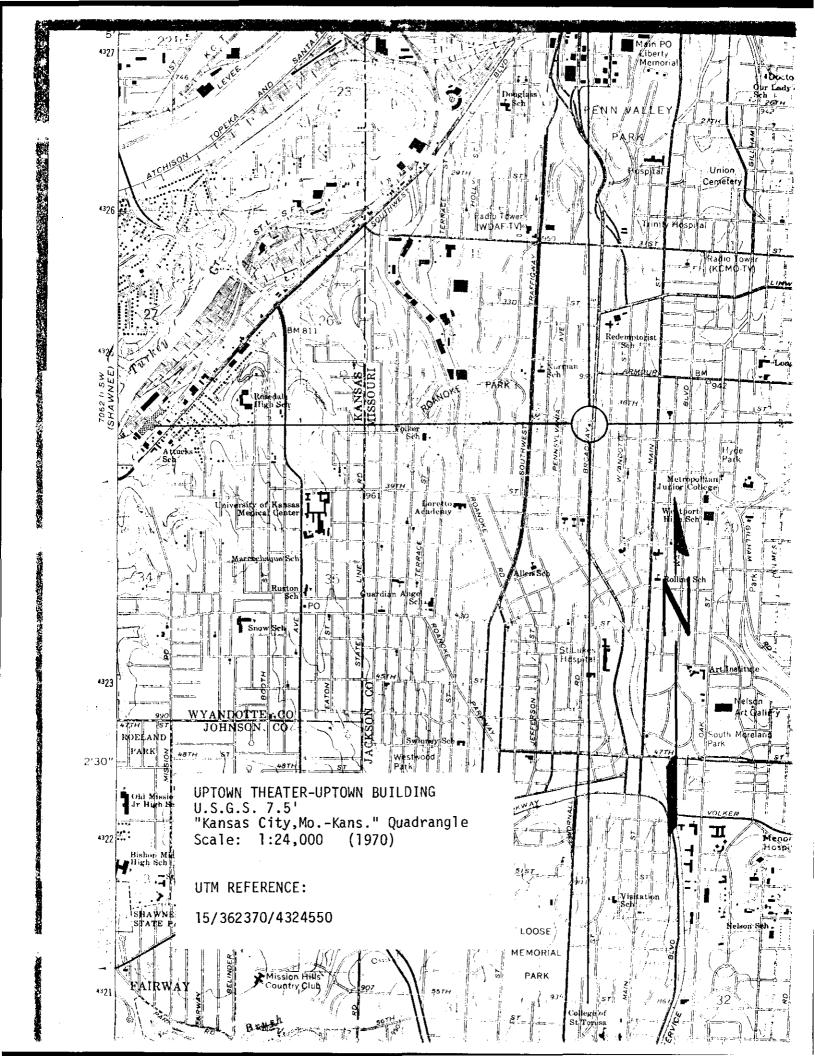
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2. James M. Denny, Section Chief, Nominations-Survey and State Contact Person
Department of Natural Resources
Office of Historic Preservation
P.O. Box 176
Jefferson City

January 23, 1979 314/751-4096

Missouri 65102



COUNTY:

Jackson

LOCATION:

Kansas City

OWNER: ADDRESS:

Mann Theaters of California, Inc. P.O. Box 60909

DATE APPROVED BY A.C.:

April 27, 1979

Los Angeles, Cal.

DATE SENT TO D.C.:

May 7, 1979

DATE OF REC. IN D.C.:

May 9, 1979

DATE PLACED ON NATIONAL REGISTER:

June 27, 1979

DATE CERTIFICATE AWARDED (AND PRESENTOR):

August 21, 1979

DATE FILE REVIEWED:

The Uptown Building and Theatre, 3700-17 Broadway, is Kansas City's sole example of the "Atmospheric Theater" a type of movie house construction popular in the 1920's. The concept is credited to John Eberson, the designer of this structure. This is Eberson's only known work in Kansas entertainment source in Kansas City. stages in 1926 and 1927 and has a long and continuing history as a popular City. The Renaissance Revival style building was constructed in two

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Uptown Building and Theatre Kansas City, Missouri photographer: Sherry Piland March, 1978 Kansas City Landmark Commission City Hall - 26th Floon 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106 Northeast corner; view looking southwest. View shows east facade on the lest and north facade on the right.



Uptown Building and Theatre
Kansas City, Missouri
photographer: Sherry Piland
March, 1978

Kansas City Landmark Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missowri 64106

East facade; view looking northwest.



Kansas City Landmarks Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106 North facade; view looking southeast



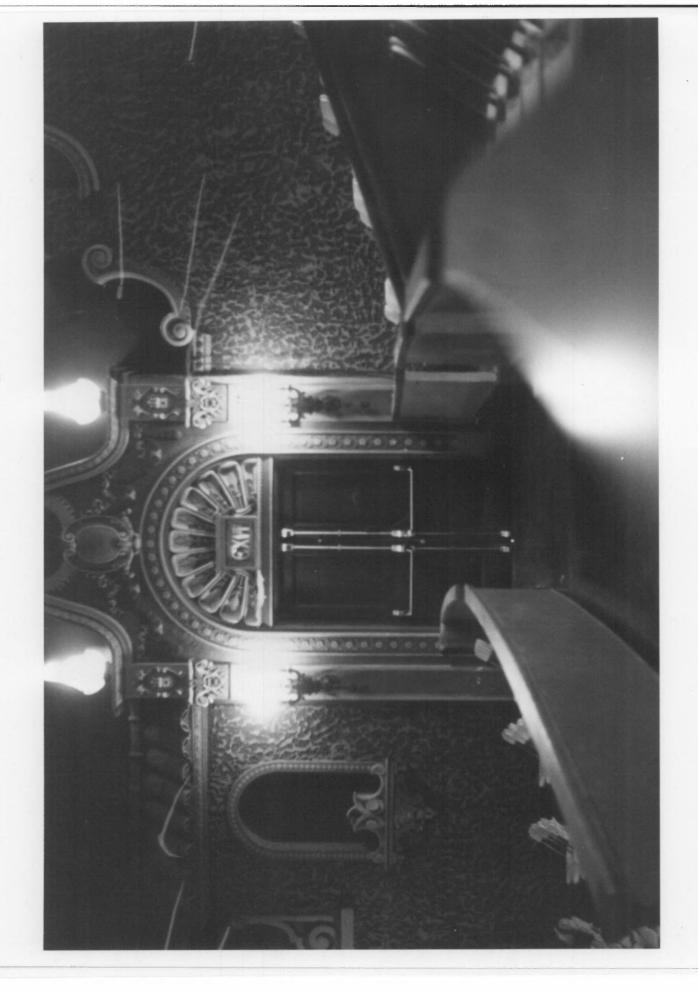
Uptown Building and Theatre #4
Kansas City, Missouri
photographer: Sherry Piland
March, 1978

Kansas City Landmarks Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106

Interior view of Uptown Theater; view looking northeast. View shows the ticket booth in the lobby



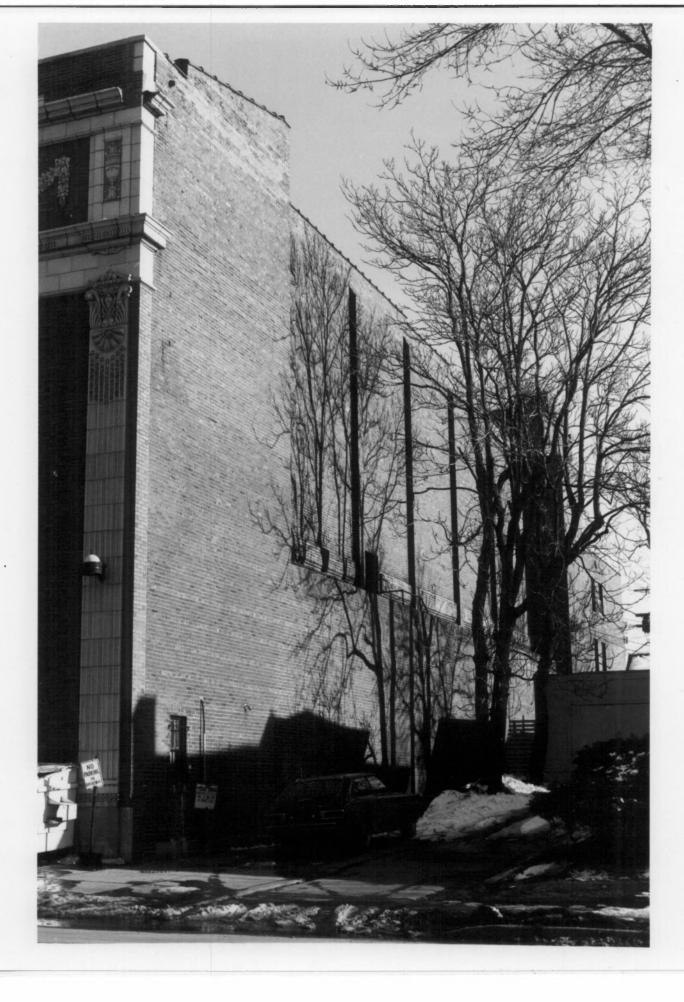
Uptown Theatre and Building Kansas City, Missouri photographer: Sherry Piland March, 1978 Kansas City Landmarks Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106 Interior of Uptown Theatre; view looking west. View shows portion of west wall of auditorium.



Uptown Building and Theater #6
Kansas City, Missouri
photographer: Sherry Piland
March, 1978

Kansas City Landmarks Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106

West facade; view looking southeast.

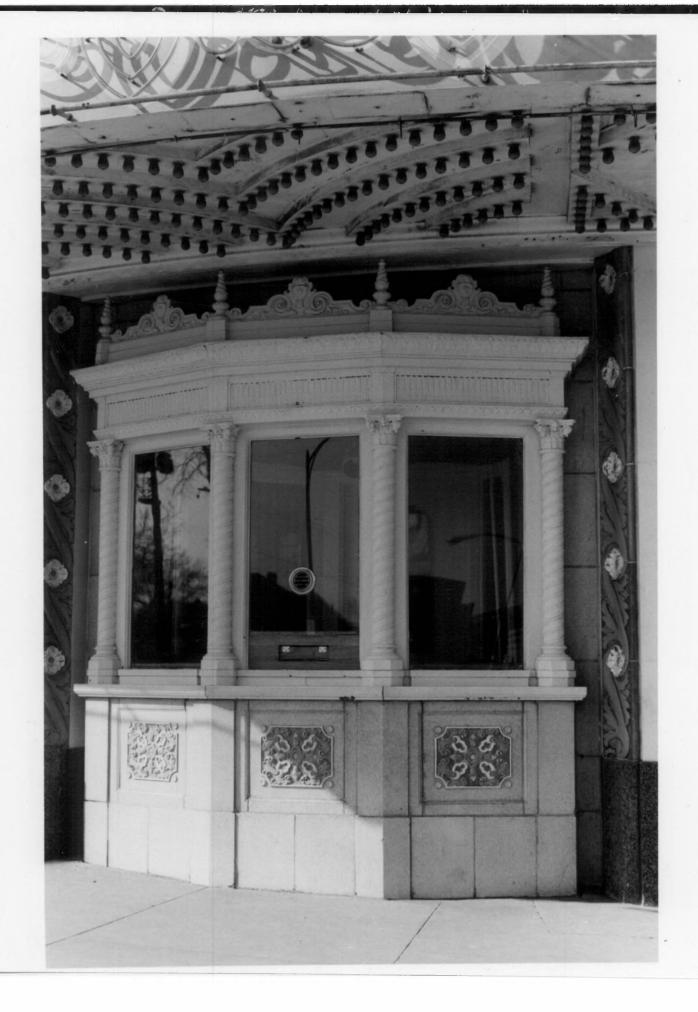


Uptown Building and Theater Kansas City, Missouri photographer: Sherry Piland March, 1978

#7

Kansas City Landmarks Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106

Detail of Uptown Theater main entrance; view looking southwest.



#8

Kansas City Landmarks Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106

Interior view of Uptown Theater; view looking southeast. View shows south wall of lobby.



Uptown Building and Theater #9
Kansas City, Missouri
photographer: Sherry Piland
March, 1978

Kansas City Landmarks Commission City Hall - 26th Floor 414 East 12th Street Kansas City, Missouri 64106

Interior view of Uptown Theater; view looking west. View shows entrances and stair case to foyer spaces.

